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C O N F I D E N T I A L THE HAGUE 002693

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/21/2013

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SUBJECT: DUTCH POSTPONE ELIMINATION OF P-3 FORCE FOR ONE YEAR

REF: STATE 271631 (NOTAL)

Classified By: CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR CLIFFORD M. SOBEL FOR REASONS 1.5 (B AND D).

1. (U) Dutch Defense Minister Henk Kamp has postponed the planned closure of Valkenburg Air Base and the elimination of the Royal Dutch Navy P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft fleet based there until January 2005. He had previously planned to eliminate these assets in January 2004. In postponing these steps, Kamp yielded in the face of strong opposition to the cuts from a majority of parliament's Second Chamber during the defense budget debate on October 23. He made no secret of his displeasure at the move -- "I hate this like poison." Kamp said the delay will cost the 13 million Euro which will force delays in other defense investments. The fate of the P-3s and their home base Valkenburg had become a public issue. MPs had also argued for leaving Valkenburg (which serves as The Hague's VIP airfield) open for one more year in view of the pending Dutch EU Presidency in the latter half of 2004.

2. (U) At parliament's behest, Kamp also agreed to consult with Germany and Belgium on the possibilities of creating an international P-3 squadron (the Dutch MOD has been exploring potential sales of its P-3s to Germany and Portugal). In addition, Kamp also agreed to explore whether other ministries such as Justice might pay for use of the P-3s for counter-drug operations. He also committed to investigating alternatives for coast guard tasks currently performed by the P-3s. (Note: Kamp has argued that the P-3s are not being used for the task for which they were purchased -- tracking Soviet submarines -- and that phasing out the P-3s and closing Valkenburg AB would yield a savings of 57 million Euro in 2004 and 700 million Euro over ten years. Kamp wants to use economies such as these to invest in new systems such as Tomahawk missiles for the navy's four new Seven Provinces-class frigates. End note.)

3. (C) Comment: Kamp is faced with the task of restructuring the Dutch defense forces in the face of significant mandated budget cuts. At the same time, he is committed to improving the deployability of Dutch forces and is seeking to increase Dutch investment in military equipment from the current level of 16 to 20 percent of the total defense budget. Prior to Kamp's budget presentation, Mission repeatedly and at high levels approached the Dutch government on the issue of retaining some P-3s in the Caribbean. Further to reftel, Post sought clarification as to how the Dutch plan to meet both their bilateral and international commitments with respect to counter-drug (CD) surveillance and search and rescue (SAR) in the Caribbean, should they eliminate P-3s based there. Ambassador Sobel raised this issue both with Kamp and Chief of Defense Staff VADM Kroon. Kamp assured the Ambassador that the Dutch would continue to fulfill their obligation in the Caribbean. The manner in which they will do starting in 2005 is not clear. MOD working levels advise that the most likely option is the GONL will purchase some civilian type aircraft to perform these missions. A less likely course would be to retain 2-3 P-3s in the Caribbean and contract maintenance and support out of the United States while still closing Valkenburg. MOD Director of Materiel RADM van Dord has contacted Mission's Office of Defense Cooperation about this possibility, but the Dutch have submitted no Letter of Request. (Van Dord recently told Mission staff that MOD's gambit had in fact been to announce an early closure date of January 2004 and then postpone to 2005 to better facilitate a sale of the aircraft to Germany and to be seen as being responsive to parliamentary concerns over an abrupt closure.) The least likely option is several P-3s would be transferred to the control of another Ministry, such as Justice. End Comment.

SOBEL